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- 1 John Michael, *Secular Lyric: The Modernization of the Poem in Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson*
- 2 Fordham University Press, 2018. Pp. 256. ISBN-13: 9780823279715
- 3 Lizzy Pournara
- 4 John Michael's book entitled *Secular Lyric: The Modernization of the Poem in Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson* (2018) constitutes an important addition to the scholarship that keeps on being steadily produced about Edgar Allan Poe's, Walt Whitman's and Emily Dickinson's poetic practice. The uniqueness of Michael's publication lies in the in-depth commentary and close readings it provides on key texts of nineteenth century American poetry under the perspective of the secularization of the lyric. It is in the nineteenth century that Michael traces the seeds of modernization of American poetry that bloomed into the twentieth century in the work of modernists such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, whose poetry would not have been possible without the poetic innovations of Whitman and Dickinson that preceded them. In addition, Michael includes to the chain of modernity the less known poetic contribution of Poe, who had gained more recognition for his prose writing. However, it was his poetry that paved the path for the modernization of the lyric that we find in Whitman and Dickinson.
- 5 In his introduction to the book, Michael connects secularization to modernity, a situation that influenced and formulated the lyric poetry of Poe, Whitman and Dickinson aesthetically and materially. The most fundamental question that Michael attempts to answer throughout his book concerns the more traditional nature of the lyric and its connection to modernity: "How does lyric, a form as old as some of the oldest poetic fragments we have – as old as Sappho – alter in the hands of these poets to become a privileged modern mode of self-expression and self-interrogation?" (16). This question is answered adequately by Michael as he moves chronologically from Poe, to

Whitman to Dickinson in order to show the development that occurred over time and how one poet was influenced by the other in the modernization of the lyric.

- 6 The first part of the book is comprised of two chapters that are dedicated to the discussion of the work of Edgar Allan Poe. The first chapter entitled “Poe’s Posthumanism: Melancholy and the Music of Modernity” discusses Poe’s attempts to take into account the “conflicted critical and popular taste” of his audience while he revamped the lyrical tradition as the foundation for “his engagement with modernity” (25). The difference in literary tastes, the mass consumption and commodification practices of the nineteenth century utterly changed the poetic scene of the time and subsequently led to the loss of “the lyric self” that Poe “mourns and exploits in his poems” by drawing on the lyrical tradition (25). The chapter focuses on the ways Petrarch and Baudelaire have affected Poe, and Michael illustrates this by providing a close reading of Poe’s essay “The Philosophy of Composition” and the poems “The Raven,” “Annabel Lee,” “Ulalume.” Chapter two delves into the origins of the modern poetry of Poe, and taking into account what has already been discussed in the previous chapter, Michael delineates the modern poetry that Poe has started tackling with the loss of the lyric self but with traditional lyric tropes. In this chapter, Michael continues the parallel reading between Petrarch and the writing of Poe in order to show the loss of humanism that is characteristic of the lyric self. This chapter brings into discussion Poe’s poems “Ligeia,” “Berenice” and “To Helen.”
- 7 The second part of the book includes two chapters that focus on the poetic practice of Walt Whitman. In the third chapter, the analysis turns to the poetry of Whitman, who “attempts to incorporate the crowd in his poetic persona” (91). Michael points out that in contrast to Poe, who translated “the Petrarchan longing for transcendence through love” actually “into perpetual melancholy in the service of a profane conception of beauty,” in Whitman’s poetry this longing and melancholy turn to erotic desire that acquires a bodily and fleshly dimension (91). Although Poe dealt with mourning, Michael writes that what Whitman did was to reject absence, refuse to mourn and to gesture “toward a transvaluation of erotic longing” (92). This chapter provides a close reading of the seminal text “Song of Myself” as well as “O! Captain! My Captain!” and *Leaves of Grass*. In the chapter entitled “Whitman and Democracy: The ‘Withness of the World’ and the Fakes of Death” Michael explores more intensely Whitman’s becoming one with the modern crowd and claims that unlike any other poet so far Whitman “has imagined himself more closely tied to the modern crowd” (125).
- 8 The third and last part of the book, which is also the shortest, contains two chapters that explore the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The fifth chapter transitions from the poetry of Whitman to the one of Dickinson, and focuses on the poet as a lyric reader. The chapter opens with Michael’s observation that compared to Whitman, who incorporates the crowd in his poetry, Dickinson acts in the opposite direction because she holds her readership at a distance (157). However, the distance that Dickinson keeps does not equal to absence of an audience. Michael points out that “[o]ne of the ways that Dickinson is a modern lyricist registers in the ways her poems manifest and read the continuous and concrete presence of an audience, however large or small, whose relationship to language and meaning the poet finds problematic” (161). Indeed, this is evident in the way Dickinson addresses her readers in a number of her poems. The fifth chapter provides an analysis of Dickinson’s poems “I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl,” “Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine,” “Sic transit gloria mundi.” The

sixth and final chapter is entitled “Dickinson’s Dog and the Conclusion” and it reads Dickinson’s poetry under Freud’s theory of the uncanny and joke, in contrast to the other chapters in the book that do not make use of psychoanalytic theory. Michael writes that Dickinson’s “poetry depends on the ways in which she renders the familiar strange and makes the world and the mind in it uncanny” (179) and, through his close reading of the poems demonstrates the defamiliarization techniques that Dickinson uses. The chapter focuses on Dickinson’s poems “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –,” “Love – thou art high –,” “The Love, a Life can show Below,” “I started Early – Took my Dog –,” “ ’Tis not that Dying hurts us so –,” “Over and over like a Tune,” “Because I could not stop for Death.”

- 9 Enlightening and stimulating, *Secular Lyric: The Modernization of the Poem in Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson* offers a particular understanding of secularization, modernity and lyric poetry as it is demonstrated through the analysis of seminal nineteenth century works of American poetry. *Secular Lyric* is addressed to scholars with a more general background, and it constitutes a very appealing read to anyone interested in exploring the origins of modern American poetry in the nineteenth century.